

Allen Kirkbride

Townhead Farm, Askrigg

Allen Kirkbride is the third generation of his family to farm at Townhead. 'My Grandfather took the farm in the late 1800's, early 1900's. He bought cattle throughout the Dales. My Father followed on, he did a little bit of dealing and carried on the farming.' Allen stepped into the role and continued the dairy business. 'I'm 68 and we've always done it! I was brought up with it, so it came as second nature.' In his time, he made some changes, including the introduction of pasteurisation on the farm and an expansion of the milk delivery business beyond Askrigg, first to Bainbridge, and eventually supplying every small shop in Wensleydale and Swaledale. In mid 2017, just a month before this interview took place, Allen stopped delivering milk to

doorsteps. 'It was just too much for my son to take on, and carry on. You need family staff really, so we've retired from that and we now send our milk to the Creamery at Hawes to make the famous Wensleydale Cheese.'



The milk comes from the herd of Fresian/Holstein dairy cows that graze in fields around the farm for part of the year, and spend the wetter, colder months, in the farm's sheds. 'We've got a hundred head of cattle at the moment but a lot of them are young ones, heifers. We're milking about fifty. As he always has done, Allen continues to milk twice a day, every day, beginning at around 5.30 in the morning. He and his wife Jenny used to do all the bottling and pasteurisation; the other farming jobs, Allen does with his son, who has his own three children and another on the way. 'We are trying to wind down a bit and he takes more responsibility.'

The farm also has three hundred sheep, with a focus on breeding Texel-cross lambs to be sold at Hawes auction Mart. 'It is a very busy little auction mart. It turns over £7 million every year and is one of the top sheep markets around.' Allen also needs to add to his own flock, and this year he may be going shopping for a tup. 'I may go to Hawes or I may travel down to Leyburn to buy a Bluefaced Leicester. But I want it really for myself – I'm not worried about the colour of the lamb's faces, which, if you are breeding to sell, you want them to look very bonny. That doesn't matter: I want a decent sized lamb to make a big sheep.'

There is 120 acres of grazing land at Townhead farm, running to the moor but not onto the heights. All of it is enclosed inbye land, lush and segmented by dry stone walls (14km of walls in total) in patterns that have remained unchanged for at least a century. Every one of the fields is named and Allen shares a few of the names with us: Dolly, Croft Hill, Esktops, Melbeck, Giant's Cradle, Bierhouse. 'Askrigg is the same as Reeth: a lot of very small fields. Small fields are brilliant in lambing time, because there is loads of shelter. But it's a complete pain in silage time because we make big bale silage, and you've got your machinery to go round all these small fields. It is hard work. A lot of hassle.'

Many of the fields have barns, but now only half of the farm's twelve traditional barns have rooves. 'They used to keep three or four cows in and the hay was there for the winter; that is what they were there for. They are just not used now. It is a shame, really. We run some sheep in and out and through spring and things like that but apart from that, we don't get any use out of them.' Instead, the family has been using new buildings, including a milking parlour, built in 1970, and barns closer to the yard. 'When I was young, we used to milk in three different buildings. We centralised that and put a building up and slurry stores.'

Something that set the Kirkbride's milk apart was the fact that it was not homogenised, so the bottled milk had a portion of cream on the top, something that is not often seen these days. Allen talks us through the details: 'Homogenisation breaks all the fat down. It has a slightly longer shelf life. But non-homogenised milk is actually the healthy milk because when it is homogenised the fat goes straight through the body into the blood cells. When it is non-

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homogenised, the fat stops in the body and the body feeds off it – and it is not a bad fat, it is a good fat. If you talk to the experts, they will tell you the same.' Allen says that there is a small market now for non-homogenised milk. 'One or two of the top-end supermarkets are selling a little bit. But the run-of-the-mill supermarkets like something that's steady, always the same.'

With a small herd, and following the way previous generations have farmed, Allen puts his cows out to grass through the summer. 'We were also selling our milk as free range: this means that the cows have got to be out to grass for so many days in the year, and you follow a husbandry routine as well. A lot of the large herds now never go out to grass. The only grass they see is what is brought into them, so they're inside 24-7.' Yorkshire is not the same as lowland dairy farms, however. 'One of the disadvantages of farming in The Dales is that you work a 200-day winter. They are out 165 days in the year and inside 200 days. If you are farming further down the valley, it is the other way round: out 200 days and in for 165.'

While the winters have always been long, the quality of the weather seems to be changing, says Allen. 'The winters have been wetter and milder. We get snow but nothing like that back in the 60's or 70's. I think that if you go back in history, and read some of the records, this is part of a large cycle and the colder spell will come back. People will call it Global Warming again and Global Cooling again - it is actually part of a large cycle.'



For winter feed, Allen makes as much hay and silage from his own fields as he can, but like every other farmer the time for cutting, and the quality, are affected by the weather, and some years they have to cut much later than they might want to, and watch the quality deteriorate. Livestock need to be out of a field six to eight weeks before the grass is cut, so getting the times right is always a gamble. He's quite happy, though with some of his wildflower meadows. 'There's no fertilizer goes on,' he explains. 'We make a heap of manure and let it rot for a year and we put that onto the hay meadows; it seems to work quite well. The one we have when you walk onto Middle Gill is really high quality. Blenheim Trust has been twice to take seeds off it to put on farms in other areas.'

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He talks about the birds on the higher farmland: curlews, peewits (lapwings) and snipe. 'There are probably more this year than the last few years, I would think. Talking to my neighbours, we all seem to think there is plenty of wildlife about.' He also sees golden plover and grouse. 'Grouse are kept – that's probably the reason why we have got so much wildlife, because the moors are kept, part of the Gunnerside Estate which is just over in Swaledale, only five miles away.'

In addition to the livestock, the Kirkbrides run two holiday cottages, and get continuous bookings. 'The holiday season is expanding all the time.' The holiday cottages are an important source of income. 'I think in this day and age in farming, you've got to diversify,' says Allen. Income also comes from

stewardship schemes. 'When we decided that we would stop retailing milk, we went into a Higher Level Stewardship scheme: we are creating some more hay meadows, doing some walling, doing things for wading birds, some tree planting. That environmental payment will bring us some extra income in to make up from the loss of the retailing side, and it's something that we wanted to do anyway.'

Allen feels some relief at having cut back on the milk retailing side. Although there are cows to milk and feed every day, there is now far less time pressure and he is able to enjoy the farm, and the land around it, more. He is also busy as a Parish Council representative, is Vice

Chairman at Hawes Auction Mart, and is involved in the Farmer Network and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority. 'We have a very good farming committee on the National Park, made up of farmers. We do discuss things and will, hopefully, keep farmers farming. We need farmers, and the more farmers we have in The Dales, the better it is for the area and the environment.'

While keeping farming alive in the Dales is a core objective of the National Park authority, the size of farms has been changing over recent decades. 'If you go back to the Sixties,' says Allen, 'I think there were twelve farms in Askrigg. There are about four now. What we are farming now was three small farms - they are amalgamated. Many years ago, we had lead mines on the Moor and it employed quite a lot of people. People had two or three fields and a barn; and that was their living, you know, they were part-time farming and employed elsewhere. With some small farmers, that has sort of happened again; it's impossible to get a good living out of farming, but you can go and have a second job of some sort and still be able to maintain your farm.'

So what future does Allen see for farming in The Dales? 'The majority of farmers in The Dales rely upon the Single Farm Payment and other environmental schemes; without those, many farms would not be viable. Hopefully, some of these schemes will keep going and I think more people are going to have to farm in an "environmentally friendly" way in order to make a reasonable income. You know you don't make a lot of money, at all, in farming. But you make a living, and it is where you are.' He talks about the dual role of caring for livestock and caring

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for the land. 'You've got to do a bit of both, and you do need a bit of livestock to keep the land in proper condition. On the moors, where they have taken thousands of sheep off, now they want them back on because they realise the sheep have got to be there to make management easier and keep it as it should be. You have got to keep farming; you have got to keep the livestock there and, most important, you have got to keep the farmer there, somehow, to keep it as it is.'

With tourists coming to the Yorkshire Dales primarily for the way the landscape looks, which is down to the way it has been farmed for so long, we ask what Allen thinks about the public's general level of understanding about farming. 'A lot of people are really very ignorant as to what happens in farming. I think the problem is, if you go back one or two generations, somebody knew

somebody or had a relation to do with farming. Now there are very few people who do, so they don't know what happens. And some press coverage can be detrimental to farming, and none of it is deserved at all, the use of antibiotics and things like that. A lot of those things just don't happen; some of the publicity that is given to farming, just isn't true.'

So what are the options for farmers who want to speak up against misconceptions? 'It's quite difficult because a lot of them don't want to listen, you know. But you go through your Farming

Union, your Farming Groups, you know NFU, CLA. They are the voice of farming and they have professionals there to put these things over into the media and try and put these things right.'

Allen meets walkers as they pass through his farm, and often talks to them, and answers their questions about farming. But when he's out there, alone, what does it feel like to be on the fields that he has worked in all his life? 'It's great. Our land is really, really very scenic. We have views all the way round: we've a good view of the dale, and with Addlebrough set back, it just makes this village. You can imagine yourself as a wee lad, all the way through – hefted. I don't know how you would put it into words really. You just feel that you are so lucky to be in an area like this. It is hard work but you don't mind it if you enjoy what you are doing.'



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